



## Social Pedagogy — A New, Familiar Tradition? Some Thoughts on the Special Issue

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*The Minority World lives in a culture where we are constantly being offered solutions before we have asked the critical questions. (Ginzburg 1989, as cited in Moss, 2001, p. 81)*

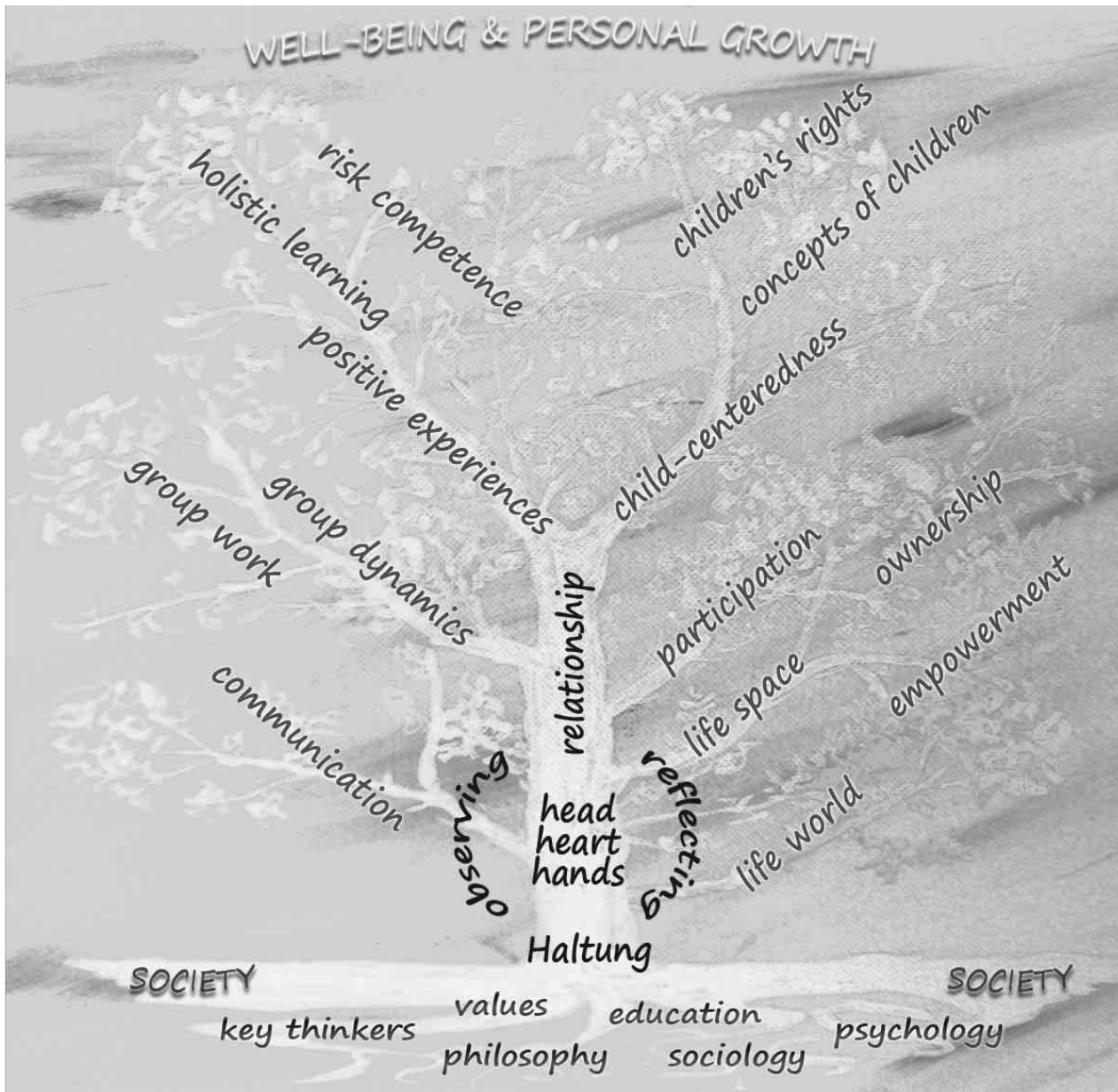
Dear readers, this special issue comes with a health warning: social pedagogy may be addictive!! Let us explain why we think so. Social pedagogy describes a holistic way of working with people across the life-course in a manner that enhances their wellbeing, supports their learning, includes them within a social network, and helps them to actively participate in society. More fundamentally, social pedagogy is based on profound respect for human dignity and an image of human beings as inherently rich in potential, competence and skills — an image emphasising the positive aspects that form the foundation for further development and relationship-building. This ethical orientation offers a starting point for understanding social pedagogy, both theoretically and at a practice level, in ways that resonate with many different professionals' own ethos and attitudes. Getting a feel, a real sense for social pedagogy is, therefore, a central intention of this special issue and one of the reasons why we've aimed to provide a holistic mixture of theoretical, practical, philosophical, historical, socio-political and scientific perspectives on social pedagogy.

Following the logic of the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, offering insights into social pedagogy is not meant to be about providing solutions but about inspiring readers to ask themselves profound questions — about what we believe children are, how we want to relate to them, what we want them to experience in their childhood, and what role we want them to play within society. Of course these questions do not just relate to children but could equally be applied to any age group. Social pedagogy has many facets to

it, partly because it has developed in response to differing societies and particular social issues — which adds to the diversity of social pedagogy across different European countries — and partly because social pedagogues can work in a broad range of settings with children and young people, but also with disadvantaged groups of adults, in the community or with older people. To convey as multifaceted a picture of social pedagogy as possible, each article in this special issue reflects its author's own understanding of social pedagogy. This is somewhat like asking different people to draw a tree, (see Figure 1).

Each picture will bring to life the drawer's own perspective, imagination and observations in a way that makes their tree different to anyone else's. At the same time all drawings will have something that also connects them: the very idea which underpins them. We believe that, despite the different ways in which our contributors have defined and described social pedagogy, there is much coherence within the diversity of social pedagogy. Each author has added another facet that fits harmoniously and without causing dissonance to the overall picture of social pedagogy, which we have endeavoured to convey.

Through the different articles that form this special issue we have aimed to reflect the continuous discourse between theory and practice by providing both a theoretical and a practical insight into social pedagogy, and to connect these where possible. The introductory article by *ourselves* outlines social pedagogy as an ethical orientation towards working with people and offers historical perspectives on how social



**FIGURE 1**  
This is what our tree drawing looks like: The Social Pedagogy Tree (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2009).

pedagogy has developed in Europe in response to social issues. The historical key thinkers introduced in this article aimed to find decidedly pedagogical solutions to tackle social problems from their roots in ways that draw on human potential and develop within individuals a sense of community and responsibility for others.

This ethos has left its imprints on the welfare state systems in many European countries. As Claire Cameron argues, countries in which the welfare state understands its role as supporting families, rather than more narrowly defining its purpose as child protection, have a strong tradition of social pedagogy and achieve better outcomes for children and young people in public care. While she cautions against de-

contextualising data about outcomes across very different cultures, her article offers an insight into cross-national comparative research and explores the value and effectiveness of social pedagogy. She concludes that social pedagogy could contribute to a wider systemic change within the welfare state, as well as societal attitudes towards children, but that there is no shortcut; no quick way of growing a tradition of social pedagogy.

This is not to say that there aren't traditions that could be considered close relatives. Robyn Kemp's article explores the ways in which social pedagogy relates to residential child care traditions in the United Kingdom (UK). She explains in her passionate commentary what social

pedagogy has to offer to practitioners and how it can further enhance reflection, relationship-building and working in the life-space by building on existing traditions of good care practice. In that sense social pedagogy is not alien to many practitioners, but offers them a holistic and meaningful framework that helps them to value the importance of their work and to relate to other professionals involved in looked-after children's lives.

Social pedagogy could also provide a paradigm shift with regard to conceptualising risk. Its contribution in resisting risk-averse practice is explored by Ian Milligan. With its focus on learning and wellbeing, social pedagogy transcends the risk discourse and emphasises that risk is elementary to human development and that professionals should, therefore, support children in acquiring risk competence. Ian Milligan's article suggests that it is in nobody's interest to continue avoiding undertaking outdoor activities that contain some risks. Based on evaluations from social pedagogy projects in the UK, he concludes that social pedagogy can help professionals become more competent and empowered to take more risks in ways that benefit children.

As social pedagogy draws on the connection between theory and practice, the remaining three articles are designed to explain what this means in practical terms. Sylvia Holthoff and Lotte Harbo outline some of the core concepts that social pedagogues draw upon in their daily practice in order to develop authentic relationships with children and turn everyday situations into learning opportunities. We also asked a group of professionals from different countries — Christina Surel, Andy Finley, Sarah Douglas and Alexandra Priver — to provide examples of social pedagogy in practice in a Danish kindergarten, a Scottish children's home and a German family support setting. These case studies offer an insider perspective into social pedagogical minds and demonstrate that social pedagogy is not so much about what we do but most importantly about how we do what we do, our attitude and intentions. Social pedagogues must therefore be highly reflective both on their direct practice and on the role they play within the wider system. Using the example of youth work in the concluding article, Filip Coussée and Howard Williamson argue that critical reflection about the very purpose of youth work within society is fundamental in order to balance the social and pedagogical tasks of youth work. According to them, social pedagogy offers a much-needed theoretical framework that helps re-think the inherent tensions between socialising young people to fit into society (youth work as a transit zone) and supporting individuality and diversity in ways that allow young people to challenge the existing social order (youth work as a forum). They show why both the social and pedagogical aspects are equally important in social pedagogy.

In conclusion, it is worth considering Lorenz's (2008) description of social pedagogy as 'an important but widely misunderstood member of the social professions' (p. 625). It is impossible to fully understand social pedagogy based on

the contributions within this special issue, although we hope they will lead to a better understanding. The journey to understanding is a (life)long one, and the articles reveal themselves in many different ways. It is worth reading them twice, as the understanding reached after reading can unlock some of the subtleties enshrined in each. And upon reflection, perhaps misunderstanding is inevitable and part of the process of translating a culturally embedded, historically grown paradigm. It can be overcome by curiosity and ongoing dialogue, by exploring individually and collectively how social pedagogy might relate to a range of social care and educational settings in Australia.

We hope that the articles in this special edition will whet readers' appetites and encourage them to find out more about social pedagogy and to get into dialogue, but also to critically reflect on their own practice and the contributions they make towards improving the life-worlds of children and young people. Social pedagogy, we believe, might put their practice into a slightly different light and help professionals value the importance of their contributions. While social pedagogy might be an unfamiliar term, it is far from our intention to suggest that it is an entirely new tradition to Australian readers. We are certain that many of the principles underpinning social pedagogy will seem familiar and resonate with professionals. And it is for this reason, for the connection of new and inspiring ideas with treasured and established traditions, that social pedagogy is potentially addictive.

On this note we would like to thank Jennifer Lehmann for granting us the opportunity to introduce social pedagogy to the readers of *Children Australia*. And we thank you for your interest in social pedagogy, hope you will enjoy your reading, and wish you a wonderful Christmas,

**Sylvia Holthoff and Gabriel Eichsteller**  
Guest Editors

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